

## **Civil Society: where are we today? An overview of experiences**

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### **Introduction**

Clearly, at these gatherings what we are doing is trying to fuse *theory* with *practice*, in order to produce *policy* and to plan *action*. This is much more satisfying than the usual arguments around “theory versus practice” and vice versa. The downside is that the fusion we are aiming at entails responsibility. If we get it wrong, we do not simply get criticized by other thinkers. If we get it wrong, people suffer.

I have been teaching politics at University level for 20 years, have written books on it and have been repeatedly involved in political work. But the basis for this intervention is elsewhere – in the more than decade and a half I have spent in the field, trying to help along the attainment of civil society; and the ten years during which I have been leading the Centre for Social Practices – and NGO devoted to civil society and good governance. All of our projects are practical, and all of them have been outside of the capital Sofia, primarily at the municipal level, including matters such as the representation of agendas of minorities and of other under-represented groups and communities. We have also been involved in such actions in Macedonia, Slovakia and Serbia.

Out of the reflections on these experiences comes this paper, and that is also the reason it looks like a collection of conclusions and generalizations, rather than a list of case studies.

### **Where are we with civil society?**

#### What happened to the state?

To know where we are we need a minimal knowledge of the background. For our purposes the story need not go back to Ferguson and Locke.

We can start it in the 1980s, when “civil society” was the battle-cry of pro-democracy groups in the former socialist countries. That battle-cry succeeded the 1970s focus of democrats on human rights, and was a logical sequence of it: an evolution from the idea of the inviolability of the individual to the right of representation and self-determination of the nation and its communities. An evolution, if you will, from “negative freedom” (where the state does not block you) to “positive freedom”, where you set the context of your life and actions by self-determination and control over the conditions in which power is exercised.

This was a movement away from the idea of the “omnipotent state”, embodied in the communist practice of government.

While we in the East were involved in this problematic, something was also happening in the West: a movement away from the idea of the “know-all” state. It was realized that the state “did

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not know best” because, it became clear, it did not have superior expertise, nor – the Weberian detachment necessary for complete impartiality in representation and resource allocation. The outcome of this was the 1980s renewed emphasis on private initiative and the market.

By the 1990s it had become clear that, while private initiative does do things better than the administrative machinery of the state, there are things it cannot do because it is not designed to. Such things include matters of representation, agenda-setting for communities and nations, national goal-formation – i.e. of politics in the Aristotelian sense as “things to do with the common future of the citizens gathered in the *polis*”.

### What happened to political parties?

For a long time, and until recently, the common future of citizens was a subject matter addressed and represented exclusively and successfully by political parties. They formed the arena where thinking about the common future – and how to get there – took place, as did matters of community representation and citizen participation.

Why, then, are we these days talking about subject, such as: low voter turnout, loss of trust in politicians, how to get citizens involved between elections and so forth? The reason is that people have ceased to bring all of their concerns, as citizens, to political parties. And this is not, as is sometimes said, because politicians themselves are to blame (because of being self-serving, or insensitive, or some other behavioural trait).

The reason that people increasingly think of their future, as citizens, outside the framework of political parties is because the enabling environment of parties has changed – and this has weakened their capacity to collect in themselves all citizenship-related problematics.

What has been happening is easy to see, with hindsight. Political parties arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the revolutionary Left was first in the field. What the Left presented as the desirable future was a complete re-design, along totally new lines, of the way society functioned. In defence of society as it was, the Right came into being, and this is how we ended up with the classic Left-Right political system that underpins any democratic politics worth the name.

When the Left and the Right were presenting societies with completely different versions of the desirable future, it was an easy step for everybody to include all of their aspirations into one or the other camp. Everyone who wanted society as it was, with minor improvements, would feel fully represented by the Right. And everyone who wanted dramatic changes in the structure and aims of society would feel adequately represented by the Left.

This is no longer the case, because over the past 20-odd years the Left and the Right have agreed on a basic framework of the desirable society. The Left has come to terms with the market economy and liberal democracy. The Right has made its own problematics such as solidarity and protection of the weak.

Such agreement on the basics means that henceforth people, when acting as citizens, are beginning to focus on details, rather than on the grand picture. This is how we end up with people getting passionately involved in one-issue movements and causes that do not fit easily either into the classic Left-Right divide, or – into the Left-Right consensus as it stands today.

This is how we end up with citizens withdrawing from political parties and wanting to attain representation, and also participation, by means other than political parties. This is, in short, how we end up with the whole problematic usually called “vibrant civil society”: citizen-like behaviour which does not flow along party political channels.

Like the glaciers at the end of the Ice Age, political parties are slowly shrinking, and this shrinkage uncovers territories, where new phenomena – quasi-political, but not party-political – begin to take root.

Is all of this good for democracy, or bad for democracy?

Whatever it is, it is not going to be as easy as we all once thought. It requires brave new thinking and result-orientated new practices.

It would have been a perfect world, had we been able to say that the future will bring to all nations an Anglo-American two-party liberal democracy. All we would have needed to do is – some copy-paste. That luxury, it is now clear, we are not being provided with.

The values of democracy are the same: representation, dignity, rights, freedom, justice, solidarity. How they are attained and maintained is what is changing and what needs re-thinking.

## **Consequences**

As was discussed in an excellent recent conference on development, held in New Delhi, power is leaking from the state and from the political parties. We may not like this, but this is what is happening. Where is this power going? And what can we do about it anyway?

There are two obvious scenarios here.

Scenario One. In confident societies, people want to participate and be represented – but, increasingly, they want to do this alongside the structures of state and parties. In such societies power is going squarely into civil society and into communities. What needs to be done here is to re-design the enabling environment of democracy so as to re-establish it along four major pillars: government (which includes rule of law), politics, free media, civil society.

It is in such societies that current ideas of reforming governance are immediately applicable. Here we see things such as: the re-formulation of governance from vertical to horizontal models; the re-invention of administrations from process-orientated to results-orientated; the re-design of policy-making in the direction of equal partnerships of all stakeholders, where government and politicians sit as equals of others; the agendas of representation, co-ownership, between-elections participation, community-centered development and so forth.

Of course, one also works for the strengthening of the state and the re-legitimation of parties as the pillars of representative democracy, and also addresses the thorny issue of media responsibility.

The basic point here is that, as long as people want representation and participation, there is no tragedy when they do it outside government and politics and prefer civil society-kinds of forms of engagement.

Scenario Two. There are societies with levels of confidence so low that, with trust in state and politics diminishing, people just stop behaving like citizens: cease to be willing to be involved in subjects and causes larger than the survival of themselves and their immediate families.

This is where civil society – the public arena where people act for the common good – dissipates; and people close up in their family bunkers, leaving everything outside to a state they no longer trust. “Let those with power do as they will, I will survive”, is the sullen message of such atomized societies.

With the state losing power, and with people withdrawing from citizenship-like behaviour, the terrain suddenly becomes free for the predators – for the mafias, the tycoon-capitalists and oligarchs, for the various fundamentalists, extremists and terrorists that are waiting in the shadows.

This is where democracy becomes façade-democracy and representation becomes populism. The power leaking away from the state is collected by the bandits and other undesirables.

We have seen this repeatedly, in some form, in most ex-socialist countries which are the new democracies of today. We will be seeing this in the dozens of countries that are beginning to grapple today with the idea of democracy.

What can be done to convince a sullen and atomized society, with little or no confidence in its own capacities, to come out into the open, build and sustain democracies? We know, after some 15 years of hit-miss efforts, that this cannot be done by just importing for local consumption ready-made models of government and politics. It is not a matter of imperative imposition – “Do this and you’ll get such-and-such results”.

Liberal democracy is not embedded in human nature. It is a deliberate construct – an artifact. Luckily for us democrats, there are characteristics and desires, which are embedded in human nature, and which, with proper sensitive handling, can be encouraged to form the basis for the liberal democracy construct.

Human beings want *recognition* and *dignity*. This is where we start, the basis on which we build. Once recognition and dignity are assured, along with the *justice* that comes with these things, human beings begin wanting *representation*. This is the subject with which we continue our democratic construction. Once represented, human beings acquire the *confidence* that makes them want to *participate* in decision-making. And, ultimately, they will want to take part in the formation of *policy*, implementation of policy, co-ownership of policy and the sharing of the results of policy.

This may all happen through the classic social contract, i.e. through political parties and government. That would be perfect, for after 300 years’ experience, we know where we are with such things. More likely than not, however, the process of constructing liberal democracy – of making societies out of democratic values – will also go via pluralist media and the increasingly complex tapestry of civil society.

## **Conclusion**

The world has never been such a dangerous place, in my lifetime at least. Moreover, it seems to be already spiraling in the wrong direction. Fundamentalism and radical extremism are on the rise, at the expense of representation and of inclusiveness.

Investing in what the EU calls “vibrant civil society” is not an optional luxury – not something that we can play around with, and then drop if we choose to. It is crucial to invest in it – and to re-define good governance accordingly – if we want to keep power away from the bad guys and provide democracy with a stable basis.

Keeping people in the process of participation as citizens is crucial for the coming years and, more likely than not – generations. And a focus on community and civil society, running alongside and in partnership with the classic focus on multi-party political systems and free media, can only help.

For, as our friend Jiri Pehe has reminded us: democracy cannot function without democrats, and democratic institutions need as their basis the kind of culture that grows out of participation.